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# Ming Porcelains

IN THE

FREER GALLERY OF ART

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION



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Freer Gallery of Art  
Washington, D. C.



## FOREWORD

**T**HIS EXHIBITION of recently acquired Ming Dynasty porcelain marks the beginning of a change in policy. Hitherto the exhibition galleries have been open to the public daily from 9 A.M. to 4:30 P.M., except Christmas Day, when they are closed. From now on, this schedule will be changed to the extent that the exhibition galleries will be open on Tuesdays from 2 P.M. to 10 P.M. This will give those who cannot visit the exhibition galleries during the day an opportunity at night when parking conditions are at their best. Added to this, we are offering a series of six lectures during the fall, winter and spring months. These will be scheduled on certain Tuesdays at 8:30 P.M.

The present booklet on Ming Dynasty porcelain is a picture book rather than a catalogue. If this sort of publication has a general appeal, it may be that from time to time, other small exhibitions from among our collections will be similarly illustrated.

A. G. WENLEY  
*Director*

FREER GALLERY OF ART  
May 26, 1953





## INTRODUCTION

**I**N THE MORE THAN four thousand years of Chinese ceramic history it is probable that no period had greater importance for the development of porcelain in Europe than did those decades at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty shortly before and after A.D. 1400. It is even more certain that no ware before or since has equalled the blue-and-white brought to perfection at that time in the extent of its influence on the ceramic taste of the whole world.

Almost a thousand years before, the Chinese had manufactured true porcelain, and centuries of experiment had yielded clear, brilliant, high-fired glazes which provided beautiful coverings. Decoration in several media had been tried in different parts of the country with varying degrees of success, and when at the end of the thirteenth century the Mongol Dynasty brought China into an international empire including the western extremities of Asia, the Chinese encountered probably for the first time the Persian taste for decorating white wares with a brilliant blue under the glaze. This led to further experiment, and with their superior pastes and glazes, working with both native and imported cobalts, the Chinese soon perfected the processes and refined the results far beyond anything ever achieved in the Near East. Thus it was that underglaze blue decoration of great beauty was produced in Mongol times, though it was only under the imperial patronage of the Ming Dynasty that the art reached its fullest flower. Beginning then the whiteness of the porcelain body was brought to absolute perfection and covered with a transparent glaze through which it shone as a brilliant background for the elegant designs which had been painted in cobalt oxide on the dried clay, and then transformed by fire into rich shades of blue.

This strikingly decorative ware at once seized the imagination of the Chinese and became the most popular among their many types of porcelain with a record of continuous and abundant production for over five hundred years. Matching this sudden burst of popularity in the land where it reached perfection was the widespread demand which blue-and-white found among China's continental neighbors and in the lands beyond the seas. It seems to have begun to move abroad as early as the fourteenth century, and it must have played its part as cargo on the great maritime expeditions which in the early decades of

the fifteenth century brought Chinese bottoms into the harbors of the East Indian Archipelago as well as those of India, Persia, Arabia and even distant Africa. In our own time, five hundred years later, travelers on those shores find blue-and-white shards on the beaches and in the fields and used for such humble purposes as road-fill still bearing witness to this ancient trade. Rivalling and then apparently outstripping the great sea-green celadons as articles of international commerce, blue-and-white wares flooded the Near East in the early sixteenth century with both land and sea routes sharing as carriers of this ever swelling tide.

News of this wonderful material must have reached Europe long since, and occasional pieces of celadon or other modest wares had found their way into the treasure chambers of some of the princely houses where they stood embellished with the finest workmanship the goldsmith, the silversmith and the enameller could lavish on them, lasting monuments to the esteem in which they were held and to the tastes and purses of their proud owners. But only in the sixteenth century did blue-and-white, the crowning jewel of the ceramic art, first dazzle European eyes and stimulate anew the curiosity that had long surrounded the mystery of porcelain. Its arrival set in motion the most serious and intensive efforts to solve the mystery and produce this ware in Europe, efforts which, in spite of the close approach achieved by the often lovely Medici porcelain of Florence, cannot be said fully to have succeeded until another century and a quarter had passed and Bottger had made his triumphant discovery at Meissen in 1709.

It was in the Near East, however, that the great collections were formed. In 1611 Shah 'Abbas the Great deposited more than a thousand pieces in the Ardebil Shrine near the shores of the Caspian Sea, and more than half of these, inscribed with the imperial dedication, remain and are housed in the Archaeological Museum at Tehran today, a collection unsurpassed in importance because of its terminal date thirty-three years before the end of the Ming Dynasty. No doubt many of these pieces had reached Persia in the fifteenth century while the sixteenth brought the number to really imposing proportions. During these same years, thanks to the Ottoman military successes on Iranian soil, the Turks too were forming a collection for the delectation of their Sultans; and this continued to grow in the palaces overlooking the Bosphorus until by the end of the eighteenth century it numbered

some ten thousand pieces, then as now the largest and most impressive collection outside of China.

The porcelains which left their homeland in those early days and traveled to regions which the Chinese considered beyond the fringe of civilization covered a wide range of quality, but it is safe to say that the finest pieces rarely went abroad. Finds in Mongolia, in the Philippines, in Celebes, Bali, Java, Sumatra, Borneo and other outposts as far away as the shores of the Red Sea and the Mediterranean include much that is rather heavy in potting and coarse in decoration. Quite naturally a considerable proportion of the huge collections in Turkey and Persia are of this same family which we describe as "export" although the existing evidence seems to indicate that on the whole the porcelains shipped to the Indies were inferior in quality to those which reached the Near East. Exceptions to what must have been the Chinese policy of supplying inferior wares to inferior peoples are more numerous than one might expect for both the Ardebil Collection and the Topkapu Sarayi contain some magnificent examples while the shard heaps of Fostat provide ample evidence that equally fine wares made their way to Egypt. No doubt these are to be accounted for by official missions and by the exchange of presents between the Son of Heaven and the Shahinshah and similar high level intercourse outside the customary commercial channels.

While the Near Eastern collections have been known to European travelers and have been described in their journals for many years, and in some cases for centuries, it was not until after the first world war that Western eyes began to know the full splendor of the imperial porcelains of Ming China. Indeed it was not until the International Exhibition of Chinese Art was held in London in the winter of 1935-36 that they came to be recognized beyond the confines of a relatively small circle of collectors and connoisseurs. In the last two decades, however, familiarity with these wares has increased considerably, and the market has responded to a growing interest on the part of private collectors as well as museums so that today there are first-rate public and private collections to be seen on both sides of the Atlantic.

In recent years the Freer Gallery has had the opportunity of assembling a small group of these porcelains, and they are now placed on exhibition for the first time. Of the thirty pieces, twenty-two are blue-and-white while eight serve to show some of the other Ming dec-



45.1

orative techniques involving the use of colored enamels over the glaze and color in the glaze itself. Examples of the latter are the large jar (Fig. 33, No. 45.35) decorated with egrets among lotus plants in the style known to the Chinese as *san-ts'ai* or three-color (a term not always to be taken literally), or more colloquially as *fa-hua*, and the dish with a dragon amid cloud scrolls incised in the paste under a solid blue glaze (Fig. 35, No. 52.3). Of special interest among the pieces with enamels is the small stemcup (Fig. 20, No. 51.16) on which the design has been drawn in pale underglaze blue and completed by the application of overglaze enamels of delicate tones; a color-scheme known to the Chinese as *tou-ts'ai*, this was perfected in the Ch'eng-hua period (1465-1487) only to be greatly admired and extensively copied almost three hundred years later in the time of the Manchu emperor whose reign was named Yung-cheng (1723-1735). While many of the Yung-cheng imitations are known, original Ch'eng-hua pieces are now comparatively rare, and this is an example of extraordinarily fine quality.

The twenty-two pieces of blue-and-white provide a comprehensive though not detailed representation of the output of this ware over a period of a century and a half beginning shortly before the year 1400. The earliest example in the present group is a large bowl (Fig. 1, No. 51.3) in the style of the late fourteenth century, a period which still retained vestiges of the bold and spirited manner and the distinctive repertory of the Mongol decorative scheme while at the same time foreshadowing the wonderful refinement which was to characterize the classic reigns of the new century. Many questions remain to be answered before we may fully understand the reasons for the great change that occurred in the spirit of porcelain decoration during the opening years of the fifteenth century, but the fact itself is more than evident to those who examine the material. The reigns of Yung-lo (1403-1424) and Hsüan-te (1426-1435) marked a new era, an era long recognized by the Chinese as classic, as a sort of Golden Age of blue-and-white; and the characteristic styles of those reigns in respect to both potting and decoration are well represented in this group. Although no piece of blue-and-white with a reliable Yung-lo mark is known, there has been a strong tradition of connoisseurship with respect to this reign among the Chinese, and this has been followed by Western students of the subject to a point where a "Yung-lo style" is now fairly generally recognized. It is only natural

that there should still be some room for confusion between these and the unmarked wares of the Hsüan-te reign for no striking change in style is likely to have occurred in the eleven months between the two rulers. On the other hand the Hsüan-te is represented by numerous pieces with authentic marks so there is a good body of highly reliable evidence for the style of the next decade, a style here illustrated by nine or ten pieces (Figs. 3-16). Following this well documented era is a ceramic interregnum of twenty-nine years. No authentically marked blue-and-white is known from any of the three reigns involved, nor does the literature on the subject provide any useful information. Attempts to determine the characteristics of porcelain made in these middle decades of the century are based on the study of the well known types that preceded and followed, and consequently there is plenty of room for speculation; but the period is one of great interest because the advent of the Ch'eng-hua reign in 1465 brought with it a fresh and unmistakably different style as well as certain new physical properties which may have been the result of technical innovations. Several unusually fine pieces represent the output of this interesting reign; three of them are marked (in addition to the *tou-ts'ai* stemcup mentioned above), and three unmarked pieces are unquestionably contemporary (Figs. 17-23). The Hung-chih period carried on over the turn of the century without any startling innovations; and a general characterization of the Ch'eng-te wares might include mention of a tendency toward heavier potting and more formal and crowded designs in continuing the traditional forms while certain new types of ornament were introduced reflecting the powerful influence exerted throughout China in this reign by the Muslim faith. In the long reign of Chia-ching, the last one represented here, the porcelain industry went into mass production, and quantity took the place of quality. Orders for the palace alone called for tens of thousands of pieces annually, and the requirements of the domestic and foreign markets must have been prodigious. Under the circumstances it is not surprising to find that the very finest Chia-ching wares (and those of Wan-li as well) fall far short of the standards set up in the fifteenth century. Yet it was these very wares that rode the sea lanes to the West in such numbers and were destined to awaken in Europe the first glimmerings of an interest that some four hundred years later developed into the connoisseurship and scholarly interest of our time.

May 1953

J. A. P.

## CHRONOLOGY

Unmarked pieces have been assigned to one or another third of their respective centuries, using the terms early, middle and late, without insisting on too great a degree of precision. When it has seemed reasonable to suggest a definite reign for such a piece with some degree of probability, the name of that reign is given in parentheses.

The dynasties and reigns mentioned herein are the following:

YÜAN (MONGOL) DYNASTY	1260-1368
MING DYNASTY	1368-1644
Yung-lo	1403-1424
Hsüan-te	1426-1435
Ch'eng-hua	1465-1487
Hung-chih	1488-1505
Cheng-te	1506-1521
Chia-ching	1522-1566
Wan-li	1573-1620

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Supplementing the material on exhibition but not included in this booklet, which is confined to the subject of porcelain, are two carved lacquer boxes representing the Yung-lo and Wan-li periods, and a small covered jar of gold set with semi-precious stones and datable to the early fifteenth century. On the walls of the gallery are Ming paintings.



1. Large bowl with peony scrolls. Late 14th century. D. 16 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (51.3)





2. Vase of *mei-p'ing* shape. Early 15th century, (Yung-lo).  
H. 9-13/16 in. (52.5)





3. Deep bowl with wave border and petal design. Early 15th century, (Yung-lo).  
D. 8-5/16 in. (51.14)



4. Shallow bowl with fruit and flower sprays. Hsüan-te mark and of the period.  
D. 8-15/16 in. (52.16)



5. Inside view of mate to above bowl. (52.17)



6. Backs of the opposite pair of bowls. (52.16, 52.17)



7. Deep bowl with white decoration reserved on a blue ground. Hsüan-te mark and of the period. D.  $7\frac{3}{4}$  in. (51.4)

8. Inside view of above bowl. (51.4)





9. Dice bowl with dragon design. Hsüan-te mark and of the period. D. 10½ in. (45.35)



10. Large shallow bowl with thick walls and fruit sprays outside.  
Hsüan-te mark and of the period. D.  $10\frac{1}{4}$  in. (52.6)



11. Foliate washer with dragon design. Hsüan-te mark and of the period.  
D.  $8\frac{3}{8}$  in. (51.13)

12. Back of above dish. (51.13)



13. Shallow bowl with garden and figures. Hsüan-te mark and of the period.  
D. 7-9/16 in. (53.1)

14. Back of above bowl. (53.1)





15. Inside of "loaf center", *man-fou-hsin*, bowl. Hsüan-te mark and of the period.  
D. 6 in. (53.2)



16. Tankard with floral scrolls. Early 15th century, (Hsian-te).  
H.  $5\frac{1}{2}$  in. (51.15)



17. Shallow dish with "the three friends" in center. Ch'eng-hua mark and of the period. D. 7-15/16 in. (51.10)



18. Back of mate to above dish showing garden with figures outside. (51.11)



19. Bowl with Ch'eng-hua mark and of the period. D. 5-15/16 in. (52.18)





20. Stemcup decorated with enamels in *tou-ts'ai* colors. Ch'eng-hua  
mark and of the period. H.  $3\frac{1}{8}$  in. (52.16)

51.16



21. Vase of *mei-p'ing* shape decorated with garden and figures.  
Late 15th century (Ch'eng-hua). H. 9 in. (53.3)

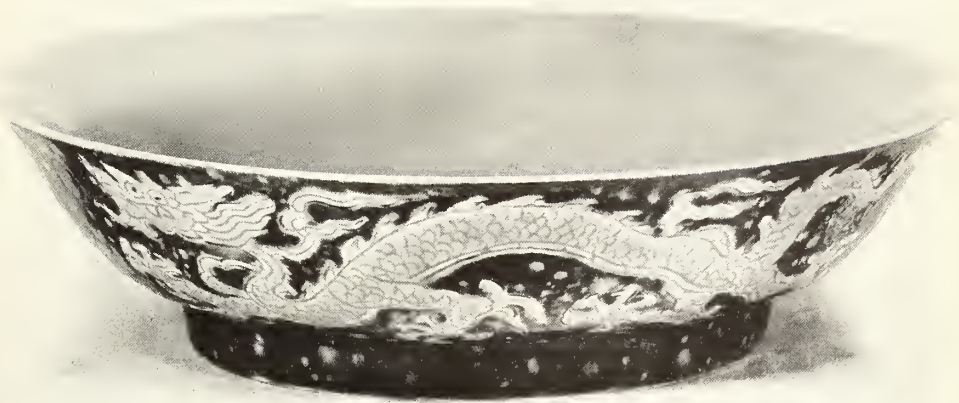


22. Bowl with garden and figures. Late 15th century, (Ch'eng-hua).  
D. 8-1/16 in. (52.4)



23. Slop bowl, *cha-tou*, with fruit and flower sprays. Late 15th century.  
(Ch'eng-hua). H.  $4\frac{1}{4}$  in. (51.12)





24. Dish with dragon in turquoise on a dark blue ground. Late 15th century.  
D.  $5\frac{7}{8}$  in. (53.4)



25. Pair of bowls with dragons amid waves. Late 15th century. H. 2 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. D. 5-3/16 in. (53.5, 53.6)



26. Inside views of above bowls. (53.5, 53.6)



27. Dish with dragon and clouds in green enamels. Hung-chih mark and of the period. D.  $8\frac{1}{2}$  in. (52.20)

28. Back of mate to above dish. (52.19)





29. Slop bowl, *cha-tou*, with dragons. Four-character Cheng-te mark and of the period. H. 4-15/16 in. (51.9)



30. Slop bowl, *cha-tou*, with green dragons on a yellow ground. Four-character Cheng-te mark and of the period. H.  $4\frac{7}{16}$  in. D.  $5\frac{1}{4}$  in. (52.21)



31. Dish with blue flowers and fruits against a yellow ground. Cheng-te mark and of the period. D. 8-7/16 in. (53.7)

32. Back of above dish (53.7)



33. Jar with "three color" decoration. Early 16th century.  
H. 12 in. (45.1)





34. Large jar with dragons and *shou* characters, Chia-ching mark and of the period.  
H. 20 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (45.36)



35. Dish with solid blue glaze over incised decoration. Chia-ching mark and of the period. D.  $9\frac{7}{8}$  in. (52.3)



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